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Congress of the United States
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March 23, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Secretary Wilkie,

As the number of confirmed positives for coronavirus grows in New York City and in New York State, I urge you and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to establish a mobile hospital unit at the Brooklyn VA Medical Center (VAMC) campus parking lot, and to consider an increase in staffing and equipment at the Brooklyn VAMC to support the increasing number of veterans affected by the coronavirus in our community.

The Brooklyn VAMC is not only the backbone of the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System, but it is also being utilized during this crisis in unprecedented ways. We have received guidance from your department that all New York City veterans who have care through the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and need to be admitted to the hospital for COVID-19 care will be admitted to the Brooklyn VAMC.

We must be proactive in planning for what will inevitably come—an influx of veterans with COVID-19 symptoms from across New York City to the Brooklyn VAMC. While the Brooklyn VAMC currently has the capacity to serve affected veterans in the coming days, we cannot wait for the system to be overwhelmed. My office has learned that there is limited capacity for additional COVID-19-positive patients at the Brooklyn VAMC, and absent an increase in staff, ventilators, and other equipment, the facility is unable to scale up.

Increasing both the medical staff and the number of ventilators available at the Brooklyn VAMC is essential. With these resources, staff on the ground have estimated that several more intensive care unit (ICU) beds, and potentially dozens of medical beds could be added to supplement the Brooklyn VAMCs current inventory—this would be an incredible and much-needed boost for the city and state hit hardest by this crisis in our country. The striking statistics speak for themselves—New York State now has over 20,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus, with over 5,000 new cases added in just a single day, and over 150 deaths caused by the virus. New York City alone accounts for over 12,000 of those confirmed cases. The VA can be New York City's biggest asset in containing this virus, and in serving those who need care most.

A mobile hospital facility, like those described by President Trump and Governor Cuomo, could also alleviate the strain on our health systems, and better serve our city's veterans. Mobile clinics have been utilized in Florida, Washington, and other states to better triage and screen patients, and to ensure low-risk patients are not put at unnecessary risk. Having this facility close to the Brooklyn VAMC will ensure efficient quarantining measures, and can offset the increased demands on the Brooklyn VAMC in caring for an entire city's population of veterans with the virus.

Preparing a mobile facility to serve veterans should be priority one—however, the VA must consider how the scope of care may change if the fourth mission of VA is activated. As you know, the National Response Framework (NRF) and the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) both include VA in critical crisis response functions, and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), at the request of a local authority, can activate VA care for non-veterans who need it. The time to increase capacity is now, because VA expanding care access to non-veterans seems more a matter of when, not if.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to being in touch with you and your department on this urgent issue for New York City veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Max', followed by a long horizontal line.

Max Rose
Member of Congress